

OUT OF GOOD IDEAS



By Cdr. Curtis Phillips

I still remember the feeling of dread that washed over me when I realized the seriousness of my predicament. It happened in the normally placid, winter skies of the Southeast, on a radio-instrument flight during my T-2 instructor-pilot tour. The series of events that took place during the flight shook me so vigorously it has taken me 10 years to write about it.

My student and I were scheduled for a cross-country and decided to escape the winter doldrums of northwest Florida by taking our jet to Key West. We broke the trip into two short legs to give us plenty of fuel to complete the required approaches. The first leg was planned from NAS Pensacola to NAS Dobbins (in Atlanta), and the second leg would take us on to Key West.

My first indication of potential problems should have come during the weather brief at Pensacola. The forecaster said, although Dobbins forecasted 1,200-foot-broken ceilings at our arrival time, the conditions probably merited a forecast for 800-foot ceilings.

Part of his concern was the low temperature-dewpoint spread, and he even cautioned that we shouldn't be surprised to see reduced visibility when we broke out. Foolishly, I was more comfortable with the weather because of his willingness to issue a more conservative forecast than the Dobbins forecasters. I felt he was erring on the side of caution, and that made me less concerned than I should have been.

We checked the weather at our alternate, considered the proximity of Atlanta to Pensacola, and were certain ample divert fields and fuel existed should we run into problems. At this point, we

were well within OpNav 3710 requirements.

Our dilemma started to unfold as we neared Atlanta. I distinctly remember looking down at the solid layer of white clouds that blanketed the entire Southeast. They stretched in every direction as far as I could see, but, armed with my pessimistic forecaster's caution, I was sure weather wouldn't be an issue. Further, we had filed for, and were expecting, a penetration descent for the high-TACAN approach to Dobbins—something we would prefer for our

fuel-thirsty jet, whose economy suffers at lower altitudes.

With our single-radio Buckeyes, checking weather was not always easy, especially when we talked to busy controllers. We still were in class-A airspace when we requested frequency changes for weather updates. My student tuned the ATIS frequencies, beginning with Dobbins. After hearing nothing, we tried Dobbins METRO. Again, no one was home. We double-checked our frequencies and decided to call a nearby Air Force base for weather.

Atlanta Center switched us to approach. We made the switch, reported in with our altitude, and promptly were told to begin a descent for vectors to the approach at Dobbins. We requested the penetration, but that didn't fit into their plans for us, so we grudgingly descended and requested another frequency change to get weather information. We still were headed straight for Dobbins.

After starting down, we finally reached a weather briefer at the Air Force base. Unfortunately, his news was not good. Ceiling in the Dobbins area was 400-foot overcast and dropping, and the pesky temperature-dewpoint spread was dwindling. Most of the suitable divert fields in the area also were reporting low ceilings—far below the forecast we received in Pensacola. I started to feel a little uneasy as we leveled at 5,000 feet.

We watched in stunned amazement as the controller vectored us away from our intended destination. Although I tried to determine his plan for us, he was swamped with traffic in the Atlanta area and had little time for me. Moreover, I failed to press the issue enough. Poor weather at all the area airports was exacerbating his problem of too many airplanes, too little airspace, and too little time. The controller vectored us around the Atlanta area, promising to sequence us in with a dozen other arrivals.

To add to my problems, this cloud-top tour of the greater Southeast was eroding my fuel reserve. I recall watching the fuel-quantity gauge and actually seeing the needle move to the left. Getting concerned, we declared minimum fuel, but with the current weather and the controller's workload, it didn't affect our routing. Finally, after several anxious moments, we got vectors back toward the airfield, with the assurance these would be radar vectors to the PAR. Time, however, had not been kind to us. The low-altitude vectoring had devoured all our fuel reserve, and, though we searched diligently, none of the fields in the area had passable weather. During the delay, Dobbins weather continued to deteriorate, and we now faced shooting a PAR to published minimums—200-foot ceilings and one-half-mile visibility. We almost were committed to Dobbins.

With my student pilot in back dutifully under the hood—blissfully unaware of our dire straits—we started our approach. As a former E-2 pilot, I had flown several approaches to 100 and one-half. I knew if we did not break out on this approach, I would continue from the front seat before allowing the student to execute the missed approach. While this clearly was a violation of OpNav 3710, I had precious few options. We



probably had enough fuel to get around the PAR pattern one more time, then it would be a matter of asking for a radial to do a controlled ejection.

Dobbins weather continued to deteriorate, and another lap around the pattern would do little good. A feeling of dread swept over me as I relived the chain of events that led to my present quandary.

I always have considered myself lucky—blessed, to be more precise—but my student flew the most “rails” PAR I ever had seen. The weather was exactly 200 and one-half. Upon reaching the MDA, I had the landing environment in sight, took the controls, and landed the airplane. No one was feeling more blessed than me.

To this day I still carry the lessons of that flight:

- Never get lulled into a false sense of security because someone else has identified a potential hazard for you. The weather briefer’s pessimistic forecast left me feeling we had taken a conservative approach to things. What it should have done was raise the hair on the back of my neck.

- Don’t push or penetrate without weather information. In this case, OpNav 3710 states,

“An instrument approach shall not be commenced if the reported weather is below published minimums...” [See analyst’s note] We did not violate the letter of the law—weather was at or above minimums—we violated the intent. We did not know what the reported weather for Dobbins was until after we descended.

- Resist or refuse routing that you don’t understand. We had no idea that Atlanta Approach was going to vector us around a GCA box pattern that encompassed the entire Atlanta metro area.

- When it comes to fuel, there never is plenty.

- Always have an out. I allowed myself to get vectored into a box without an honorable exit.

I was an experienced pilot and instructor, and, yet, through a seemingly harmless chain of events, I almost arrived at a place where I was in an airplane and out of good ideas. That is not a place anyone wants to be. 

Cdr. Phillips flew as T-2 instructor with VT-4 at the time of this incident. He currently is the executive officer of VRC-30.

Analyst comment: The author’s decision to commence an approach was based on weather, and he also mentions his intent. OpNavInst 3710.7S discusses single- and multi-piloted approach criteria. This is what the instruction says:

Single-piloted criteria: Aircraft shall not commence an approach if the weather is below published minimums for the type of approach being conducted, unless there is no intent for landing and the facility in question is not the filed destination or alternate.

Multi-piloted criteria: An approach can be commenced when reported weather is at or below published landing minimums as long as the aircraft has the capability to proceed to a suitable alternate in the event of a missed approach.

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Photo by PH3 Brian Fleske
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